

The First Sunday after Christmas – 2021

Exodus 13:1-3a, 11-15

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:22-40

My mother was born in 1925. As a young lad, my mother told me about a “red badge of courage.” It was an indispensable part of a woman’s presentation to the world – or so I was told: A bright, red layer of lipstick. Put this badge, this armor in place and one was prepared to meet any social challenge, to leave timidity and fear behind. Courage; we all have our own elixirs for mustering our courage. Some people literally drink their courage. Alcohol is consumed by some to overwhelm feelings of being small, of being awkward or insignificant. After the booze wears off, we are left with ourselves. Courage; the dictionary defines courage as “the ability to face danger, difficulty, uncertainty, or pain without being overcome by fear from a chosen course of action.” I like that definition. Let’s reduce it. Courage is the art of acting deliberately regardless of the threat level. Courage is not behaving recklessly, not “devil may care,” but the art of acting deliberately regardless of the threat level.

We all know our own hearts. We act differently when we are afraid than when we are confident of a situation’s outcome. We also have had triumphs of courage. It is an empowering feeling. Conversely, cowardice is the most abject of terrors. The original “Red Badge of Courage” is an American novel about a young private who flees from the field of battle. Set in the Civil War, this infantryman in Union Blue is awash in shame and he longs for a genuine wound in battle, having his own blood on his uniform as a conspicuous sign of courage, a “red badge of courage” to testify to his character. Christians, what character runs in our blood? What type of courage do we possess?

If there were no threats there would be no occasion for courage. This world is full of threats, wouldn’t you say? None of us is a bullmastiff or a Goliath who storms about without apprehension, believing ourselves to be impervious to casualty. We need courage to navigate this life well. Even more, our own personal courage benefits others, benefits society, and is to be aspired to, trained intentionally. Fathers are to train their sons; mothers their daughters.

We have a word for building up courage in someone – we “encourage” others, we breathe confidence into the hearts of our friends, we inspire and motivate others to act courageously – to beat back fear, timidity, apprehension. I was climbing a ladder some time ago; a long/tall ladder. An ally of mine, a younger, stronger fellow – not a family member – was assisting in this enterprise. I’d had a burst of youthfulness in my head (don’t know where that came from) and I, not the younger fellow, bounded up the ladder. As I’m nearing the top, my ally, my boon compadre, my (at the time) trusted confidante said: “It gets kind of rickety up there at the top; makes you kind of feel like it is going to give way.” Not encouraging.

Simeon held the infant Christ. In that moment, death lost its sting for Simeon. Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy Word. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel. Holding the incarnate Lord, Simeon possessed the heart of a lion. Hope, confidence and courage overwhelmed any fear. Simeon had waited, (waited) for the

consolation of Israel. Simeon had waited for a Redeemer, a Savior, One who would remove guilt, who would cleanse the soiled and bring hope to the oppressed. The infant Lord comes to His Temple and in that moment all of heaven's architecture broke in on the mind of Simeon. In that moment he was encouraged, he was lifted up, he was liberated from waiting – the Christ had come.

By a strong hand the Lord brought you out of slavery, out Egypt (Exodus 13:3). So said the Lord to Moses. This deliverance was an event that was to be commemorated. At Passover, and in consecrating the first born, God wanted this event remembered and honored and celebrated. The blood of the Lamb is what safeguarded God's people as the tenth plague, the plague of death swept over Egypt. A strong hand, the Lord's hand, the Lamb's blood – that was encouragement, that is what inspired courage. A red badge of courage ornamented the doorposts and the lintels of God's people. It was not a self-manufactured courage, but something the Almighty bestowed upon His people as death swept through the land. The people knew: God is acting deliberately on our behalf. God is for us. We will trust and not be afraid. Lamb's blood – it was protection from death. At Easter we sing this: Where the paschal blood is poured, Death's dread angel sheathes the sword; Israel's host triumphant go Through the wave that drowns the foe. Alleluia! Encouragement. God breathes courage into you through His Son, through His Spirit, through the Gospel, through Christmas, Immanuel, God with us.

Jesus was brought to the Temple to be consecrated. As the true Firstborn, He who is the Redeemer is to be redeemed. Since He is the Lamb of God no other lamb is necessary and Joseph offers the poor man's alternative – two turtledoves. Simeon sees the One who would be the firstborn from among the dead, the One whose blood would mark the door of our hearts, and Simeon was "encouraged." It had been revealed to him that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ. But what did he see? An infant. *This* is encouragement? Simeon knew in his heart that it was. What threat could diminish this incarnate consolation? God had come to act and Simeon was encouraged. Simeon opened his age-old mouth and spoke. How many of us have been encouraged by what he said?

Now you must listen to an unhappy word which must be spoken and acknowledged. You have spoken words of discouragement. Not words of justice to lay bare a hidden truth, but a mean-spirited stream intended to inflict pain, to sap courage. Discouragement has ushered from your lips to bring down, to deflate, to diminish. In your own discouraged spiritual state, you have sought to inflict others with your pessimism, your fear, and your lack of faith. It is a sin to be a source of discouragement to your brothers and sisters in the faith. It is a sin to serve as an agent of fear so that the promises of God hang limp in your brothers' and sisters' hearts. Have you presented a lukewarm approach to God's Word, apathy toward this divine source of courage because you have other things to do. Will you desert the field of battle? Open your eyes. The regiment of Christ the King is on the battlefield. We prepare in Bible class. There, we hearken to our Captain's voice in His Word. Threats are near and our spirit needs to be fortified.

Here's a soldier's prayer that I like:
"Stay with me God; the night is dark.
The night is cold; my little spark
Of courage dies. The night is long

Be with me God and make me strong.

Life shrinks or expands according to one's courage – and you can help others' lives expand. Is allegiance seen in you? Fidelity, devotion, unqualified commitment to our Captain – such a life does encourage, it does strengthen the body. Are you contributing to the “esprit de corps?”

We have a “red badge of courage.” Christ's holy wounds; His red blood; His unqualified courage. On the holy cross, our Captain won the battle. On this day, He holds the field. Death has no sting. His blood is on our uniform. The way I see it, we have high esprit de corps. Morale is high because it is God's Word that breathes courage into us. The Gospel conveys a life that is not subject to threats. Christ is risen and is at the right hand of God. We are safe in His hands. Though we may feel high up on a ladder, a ladder that is rickety at the top, we are safe. About Christ the King Lutheran Church, Jesus said this: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28). Courage; His glory lightens our souls and we are fed with the bread of life. Beneath Christmas is this verse from the book of Joshua: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).